

Integrating the student feedback in the faculty quality management

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Abstract

In the context of an ever growing competitive educational market, universities acknowledge the need to integrate the students' perspective within the quality management system. Despite the fact that student evaluation of teaching has been an active area of research for more than half a century, given the particularities of the Romanian education system, it is necessary to further analyze the relevance of the international findings within the national context. This study presents the results obtained at the students' ratings of instruction along 3 consecutive years at a Romanian university and the factors found to interfere with students' ratings. The students consider their appraisal of low importance for improving the teaching performance and tend to be reluctant in filling in the questionnaires. Nevertheless, the average evaluation scores show an increase of the ratings across the three academic years. Given the information offered, if properly interpreted by taking into account the biasing factors, the student feedback represents a fundamental human resource quality management technique for higher education institutions.

Key words: faculty quality management, higher education, student evaluation of teaching.

Student feedback in higher education institutions

The evaluation of the teaching staff's performance is an important component of the human resource management system in higher education institutions. There is a variety of evaluation mechanisms used by universities among which the most frequent are: faculty self-evaluation, student evaluation of teaching, evaluations done by colleagues, by the management of the institution, research activity evaluation, or course portfolio evaluation (Zaharie, 2006).

Student feedback with regard to the teaching activity represents a common quality management technique used by universities, being an active area of study for more than half a century. The expanded collection of studies on student evaluations of teaching pleads for the importance they play in for the higher education system. No matter the critiques brought to this quality management practice, it remains one of the most used methods of evaluating the quality of teaching in universities. It is used both as a formative means of evaluation and as a criterion applied when taking personnel decisions, such as rewards and promotions. Identifying and understanding the factors which influence the student evaluation scores is essential in deciding what quality management strategies to adopt in order to improve the teaching activity (Theall & Franklin, 2001).

At international level, during the last decades of the 20th century, the teaching evaluation done by students has become a frequent practice of appraising the academic performance of the faculty. Owing to its efficacy (low financial and time costs, satisfactory validity and reliability coefficients) the students' ratings of instruction represent one of the most frequently used methods of academic evaluation (Costin, Greenough & Menges, 1970).

Compared to the well developed states, in Romania, as it regards the quality of education, the Law no. 88 on Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions was issued in 1993. Only in 2005, along with the issuing of the Government Decree no. 75 for Quality Assurance

in Education, became the procedures for periodical evaluation of the faculty become a requirement for Romanian universities. The areas of quality assurance in higher education relate to: a. institutional capacity, b. educational effectiveness, c. quality management. With respect to Babeş-Bolyai University, student evaluation of teaching has become a quality management practice being applied since 2001 (Gherghin, 2004).

Besides the debate regarding the validity of the instrument used in the teaching evaluation by the students, a series of studies questioned the usefulness of the student ratings of instructors (Emery, Kramer & Tian, 2003, Al-Issa & Sulieman, 2007). Harvey (2003) observes that even if most of the educational institutions gather the feedback from the students, in many cases the manner in which they use the results, is not as clear. As to the management perspective, the efficiency of the evaluation is always linked to its purpose. The evaluation has at least three distinct purposes: *formative purpose* (to improve the quality of the ongoing process of teaching), *summative* (as a ground for personnel decisions, such as promotions or wage settings), and *informative* (as a source of information for the prospective students) (Miclea & Opre, 2002). Some studies support the utility of the summative evaluations, but question their usefulness in formative purposes (Cashin, 1995), but referring to the students' perspective, other studies find no differences with respect to the purpose of the evaluations (Young, Delli & Johnson, 1999).

The field literature shows that there is an impact of the cultural context on the teaching evaluation process (Rindermann, Schofield, 2001). Given the particularities of the Romanian education system it is required the further analysis of the relevance of the international research results in the national context. The present study presents the analysis of the results obtained at the process of student teaching evaluation, conducted in 3 consecutive years at Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj Napoca.

Methodological design

A total of 16509 students participated in the teaching evaluation process during the three years. The evaluation form is distributed without announcement to the students at the end of each semester, two or three weeks before the examination period starts. In this way there is prevention for the grades obtained to bias the evaluation scores. In order not to affect the students' feedback, the procedure requires for the teachers not to be present in the class room during the evaluation process and the results are returned back to the faculty only after the examination period. The evaluation form includes 13 items assessing the quality of the teaching; each of them phrased both in the positive and negative manner. The items are measured on a 5 points Likert scale. Analyzing the reliability of the measurement instrument, the value of the internal consistency (Cronbach's- α coefficient) was 0.90, which indicates good reliability (Field, 2000).

Analysis and interpretations of student feedback

Analyzing the scores obtained in the evaluation questionnaire, the highest evaluated items refer to *the teachers' availability to answer the students' lack of understandings* (average mean 4.53, $\sigma = 0.84$), followed by *informing the students in due time the evaluation criteria and procedures* (average mean 4.29, $\sigma = 1.02$), and *efficient use of the time dedicated to the class* (average mean 4.25, $\sigma = 0.95$). Analyzing the content of these items we can notice that the organizational dimension of the teaching activity and the teacher's openness to the relation with the students are most appreciated by them. The lowest evaluated item refers to the *diversity of the methods used in the teaching process* (average mean 3.44, $\sigma = 1.31$).

All the ratings of the items in the evaluation form are significantly correlated among each other (the Pearson correlation r coefficient varies from .27 to .78, $p < .001$). The last two items evaluate the general students' feedback regarding the discipline and the instructor teaching the class, by asking the students about further recommendation of the instructor and the course. Similarly, there is a high correlation between the two items ($r = .78$, $p < .001$), which means that a

high level of satisfaction with the teacher generally also implies satisfaction with the discipline. The items stronger correlated with these two final items refers to the teachers *explaining the difficult aspects of the class* ($r = .60, p < .001$) and the degree in which *the course raised students' interest for the field* ($r = .58, p < .001$). These results show that students' willingness to have other classes with the evaluated teacher is strongly related to the clarity and explicitness of the class and to the degree in which the teacher succeeds in making it seem interesting for the students.

One of the main difficulties in administering the student evaluation of the teaching process within our institution is related to students' complaints regarding lack of noticeable changes in the teaching activity (both as improvements in the quality of the teaching or sanctions administered to the low ranked academic staff). One of the requirements of the student ratings of instruction in order to be effective in improving the quality of teaching is for the institution to close the feedback loop: after surveying the students' opinions, to establish improvement strategies and then to inform the students about the corrective actions resulting from their perspective (Watson, 2003).

Analyzing the effects upon the ratings of the students' attitude regarding the evaluation, Greimel-Fuhrmann & Geyer (2003) finds that a third of the student sample doubts the fairness of their colleagues' ratings, while some of them doubt even the usefulness of the evaluations. The authors show that the evaluation scores are higher for the students who doubt more of the fairness of the evaluations.

Many of the students in the analyzed university point to the fact that their assessment is of low importance for improving the teaching performance and tend to be reluctant in filling in the questionnaires. The analysis of evaluation results along the 3 consecutive years shows a significant decrease in the total number of evaluation forms filled in by the students. On the other hand, the average evaluation scores from each of the years analyzed show an increase in the ratings across the three academic years.

In order to identify the evolution of the students' feedback in time, we compared the scores obtained in each of the years included in the sample. For the first year of evaluations included in this study the average mean score obtained is 3.96 ($\sigma = 0.75$), for the second year the mean is 4.02 ($\sigma = 0.75$), and for the third year the score is 4.13 ($\sigma = 0.72$). The variance analysis (Anova) shows significant differences between the evaluation scores obtained in each of the three years $F(2, 16506) = 55.837, p < .001$. For analyzing the specific differences between the three years we conducted Tukey HSD post hoc test. The analysis shows an increase of the average evaluation scores in 2007 compared to 2006 (Tukey = $-.06, p < 0.001$) and an even greater increase in the scores obtained in 2008 (Tukey = $-.16, p < 0.001$).

Except for the item assessing the workload of the course, all the other items improved significantly across the three years. The highest improvement regards the *teachers informing the students from the beginning of the semester about their expectations and evaluation process* $F(2, 16625) = 39.52, p < .001$. These results show the efficiency of the strategies implemented by the institution in order to improve the teaching quality, especially in establishing a set of standards regarding the organization of the courses and the teaching materials.

There are differences in the evaluation scores between students who missed most of the classes and those who attended most of the classes along the semester. The Pearson coefficient shows a negative correlation between the number of absences of the students and their assessment of the courses evaluated ($r = -.16, p < .001$). That means that the more frequently a student misses a class the less favorable the ratings are going to be.

Analyzing further other factors which might influence the evaluation scores, the number of students in the evaluation group is significantly negative correlated with the appraising scores. The Pearson r coefficient takes values ranging from $-.02$ to $-.1, p < .001$, which means that the students in smaller groups evaluate more favorably the teaching activity.

Comparing the evaluation results according to the students' year of study, we identified differences between junior and senior students $F(2, 16638) = 21.36, p < .001$. The students in the first and second year of study tend to evaluate less favorably the teaching activities, while as they move on in the third and last year of study their evaluations increase.

Table 1. Evaluation results according to the students' year of study
 Dependent Variable: Average summative evaluation score, Tukey HSD

(I) Year of study	(J) Year of study	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
1 st	2 nd	-,06692(*)	,01539	,000	-,1089	-,0249
	3 rd	-,13107(*)	,01538	,000	-,1730	-,0891
	4 th	-,10750(*)	,01771	,000	-,1558	-,0592
2 nd	1 st	,06692(*)	,01539	,000	,0249	,1089
	3 rd	-,06415(*)	,01673	,001	-,1098	-,0185
	4 th	-,0204058	,01889	,030	-,0921	,0110
3 rd	1 st	,13107(*)	,01538	,000	,0891	,1730
	2 nd	,06415(*)	,01673	,001	,0185	,1098
	4 th	,02357	,01889	,723	-,0279	,0751
4 th	1 st	,10750(*)	,01771	,000	,0592	,1558
	2 nd	,0204058	,01889	,030	-,0110	,0921
	3 rd	-,02357	,01889	,723	-,0751	,0279

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Comparing the results obtained by the academic staff according to the gender, the results of the independent *t* test show that female teachers get slightly higher ratings than the male teachers ($t = 6.465, p < .001$). Contrary to other studies (McPherson, Jewell, Kim, 2009) which find that male instructors get higher evaluation scores than the female instructors, our results show the opposite.

Reviewing the literature on SET, researchers identify (McPherson, Jewell, Kim, 2009, Cashin, 1995) multiple variables which bias the evaluation results. One of these variables is the teaching rank of the faculty assessed. In some studies the teachers occupying a higher rank are found to be more favorable evaluated by the students (Cashin, 1995), whereas others show that younger teachers are more popular than the older ones (McPherson, Jewell, Kim, 2009). The present results show that the teachers with lower academic rank are better assessed by the students $F(3, 16171) = 60.03, p < .001$. The results show that the young teaching assistants and junior lecturers get better evaluation scores than their colleagues with higher academic ranks.

Table 2. Evaluation results according to the faculty academic rank
 Dependent Variable: Average summative evaluation score, Tukey HSD

Academic rank	(J) Academic rank	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
1 Professor	2 Senior lecturer	-,07626(*)	,01588	,000	-,1171	-,0355
	3 Junior lecturer	-,09455(*)	,01487	,000	-,1328	-,0563
	4 Teaching assistant	-,36345(*)	,02739	,000	-,4338	-,2931
2 Senior lecturer	1 Professor	,07626(*)	,01588	,000	,0355	,1171
	3 Junior lecturer	-,01829	,01425	,573	-,0549	,0183
	4 Teaching assistant	-,28719(*)	,02705	,000	-,3567	-,2177
3 Junior lecturer	1 Professor	,09455(*)	,01487	,000	,0563	,1328
	2 Senior lecturer	,01829	,01425	,573	-,0183	,0549
	4 Teaching assistant	-,26890(*)	,02647	,000	-,3369	-,2009
4 Teaching	1 Professor	,36345(*)	,02739	,000	,2931	,4338

assistant	2 Senior lecturer	,28719(*)	,02705	,000	,2177	,3567
	3 Junior lecturer	,26890(*)	,02647	,000	,2009	,3369

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Concluding remarks

Considering all the argumentation with regard to the validity of the student evaluation of the instruction process, the biasing sources or its usefulness for the teaching ranks, it is understandable for universities to further analyze the efficiency of the student evaluation of teaching implementation and to try to adjust the teaching ranking to account for the biasing factors (Pounder, 2007, Ory & Ryan, 2001). A valid instrument, scientifically developed, does in a great extent counteract some biasing effects of certain factors. Some other variables can be controlled through the means of a correct instruction at the administration of the questionnaires. Setting a clear procedure, which to be followed exactly is a required condition for the success of the evaluation no matter its purpose. Despite the ongoing criticism, universities should identify the required elements for increasing the validity of this quality management technique and maintain gathering student feedback for improving the teaching process (Centra, 2003). Students remain a fundamental source of feedback and contribute to the educational institutions' competitive advantage (Delaney, 2008).

Regarding the most often invoked objective of the student rating of instructing - to improve the quality of teaching, it is worth mentioning that evaluations do not necessarily lead to the teaching enhancement. The faculty's openness to the feedback and the students' attitude towards the evaluation are of great importance for the teaching improvement. In addition, the students do not have to be the only source of feedback for the quality management of teaching. Their perspective can be accompanied by peer reviews, by evaluations made by the management, and self-evaluations, which will offer a more valid feedback regarding the educational system. If properly analyzed and interpreted taking into account the biasing factors, accompanied by other different sources of feedback, the student evaluation of teaching represents a fundamental human resource quality management technique in higher education institutions.

Questions that lead to discussions following the presentation:

Is the student feedback a reliable indicator for the quality of teaching?

Do faculty members grant sufficient trust for the student feedback so that to become an efficient quality management technique?

How can students be persuaded that their feedback contributes to the enhancement of the quality of teaching?

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